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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence. Subjects were 157 male and 215 female college students who completed a consent form, demographic questionnaire, the Texas Social Behavior Inventory, and the Body Parts/Physical Attractiveness Scale. Significant correlations between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence for both female and male subjects were found. Both females and males who perceived themselves as physically attractive also tended to perceive themselves as socially competent. For females, weight, height, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance were found to significantly contribute to the level of self-perceived social competence. For males, only height and overall facial appearance were found to significantly contribute to the level of self-perceived social competence. These findings indicated that men used fewer variables than did women when accounting for body characteristics that contribute to the level of self-perceived social competence. (NB)

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An Examination of the Relationship Between Self-Perceived Physical Attractiveness and Social Competence

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Abstract

Significant correlations between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence for both female and male subjects were found. For females, weight, height, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance were found to significantly contribute to the level of self-perceived social competence; whereas, for males, only height and overall facial appearance were found to significantly contribute to the level of self-perceived social competence.

INTRODUCTION

An individual's physical appearance is the personal characteristic that is readily accessible, easily scrutinized and most obvious to others in a variety of social interactions. One dimension of physical appearance, physical attractiveness, has long been ignored by social scientists and social psychologists. This lack of interest can be attributed to the notion that it is undemocratic to find evidence to support the contention that a beautiful female is better liked than a homely female (Aronson, 1969). Recently, there is a turning from this indifference to a cautious thought. Physical attractiveness may be a useful dimension for understanding human development, human personality and social exchange and can no longer be an ignored variable in the investigation of human relationship.

Researchers have attempted to systematically evaluate the effect that physical attractiveness has on interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Physical attractiveness has been determined to be important in getting along with others, in acquiring mates, in having good sex lives and in feeling satisfied with the self (Berscheid, Walster & Bohrnstedt, 1973). By definition, physical attractiveness is the individual's aesthetic appeal as a visual social stimulus (Cash, Rissi & Chapman, 1985). Variables such as locus of control (Mathes & Kahn, 1975), dating behavior (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams & Rottman, 1966), sex roles (Cash, Rissi & Chapman, 1985), depression (Marsella, Shizuru, Brennan & Kameoka, 1981), happiness (Mathes & Kahn, 1975) and self-esteem (Mathes & Kahn, 1975; Major & Carrington, 1984) have been interrelated with physical attractiveness. The relationship of interest for this particular study is physical attractiveness to social competence.

Within the current literature, social competence and self-esteem are often interchanged. But, to better comprehend social competence, it is

important to examine self-esteem. Simply defined, self-esteem is an individual's self-evaluation (Coopersmith, 1967). More specifically, Branden (1969) defined self-esteem as the integrated sum of self-efficacy and self-respect. The first aspect, self-efficacy, is an individual's sense of personal confidence. This sense of personal confidence will be exhibited as part of the individual's social behaviors or social competence.

Social competence is defined as an individual's ability to interact effectively across diverse interpersonal situations (Campbell, Steffen and Langmeyer, 1981). Basic socially competent behaviors range from the ability to make friends, speak to supervisors, get dates and enter into other situations which may require a complex series of social behaviors (Steffen and Redden, 1977). Weiss (1968) discusses social competence as the ability to develop rapport by expressing interest and understanding in a social encounter. Argyle and Kendon (1967) cite social competence as being comprised of such criteria as friendliness, helpfulness and cooperation in maintaining relationship. For the remainder of this study, the term, social competence, will be used and measured according to the level of the individual's ability to interact effectively in social situations such that the individual's needs are satisfactorily fulfilled (Helmreich, 1971).

Actual research conducted by Lerner and Karabenick (1974), Adams (1975), Lerner et. al. (1973, 1976) and Berscheid et al. (1973) concluded there is a significant correlation between self-esteem and specific body parts for both females and males. Adams (1975) contends that other-rated physical attractiveness and the degree of self-esteem suggests that attractiveness is significantly correlated to self-acceptance for both sexes. Maruyuma and Miller (1981) concluded that there is a linear relationship between attractiveness and self-esteem for both males and females. Lerner et al. (1976)

contends that physical effectiveness is significantly related to self-esteem for males and physical attractiveness is significantly related to self-esteem for females. Miller (1970) argued that physical attractiveness should be less influential for males than females. Miller stated that males are more likely to report perceived success and have similar self-esteem regardless of their level of physical attractiveness. Females should report more success and higher self-esteem than unattractive females.

Purpose of the Study and Hypothesis

Specifically stated the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence. Self-perceived social competence was investigated to determine if there was a significant correlational relationship with the following variables: self-perceived physical attractiveness, gender, weight, height, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance.

METHOD

Based on previous, conflicting research data, the exact nature of the relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence is ambiguous. This particular study attempted to systematically examine the above-mentioned relationship and bring a better understanding to this relevant subject matter.

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 157 males (42.20%) and 215 females (57.80%; total N=372) enrolled in various undergraduate psychology courses at the University of Kansas in the Spring of 1988 and Fall of 1988. The mean age for males was 19.7 years (SD=1.97 years), and the mean age for females was 19.3 years (SD=2.64 years).

Procedure

After approval from the human experimentation committee at the University of Kansas, undergraduate students from the University of Kansas were recruited from the research psychology pool located in Fraser Hall. The subjects received one research credit for participating in the study. Students enrolled in Counseling Psychology 210 were also approached.

Each subject was given a packet, including the consent form, a demographic questionnaire, the Texas Social Behavior Inventory and the Body Parts/Physical Attractiveness Scale. Responses to the instruments were recorded by the subjects directly onto the instruments.

Instruments

The test packet consisted of a consent form, a demographic questionnaire, the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) and the Body Parts/Physical Attractiveness Scale.

The demographic questionnaire requested the subject to provide the following personal information: age, sex, height, weight, marital status, race, major and religious affiliation.

The Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) was developed by Helmreich, Stapp and Ervin (1974) based on the need for a reliable scale used to categorize individuals as a function of the perceived level of social competence. The original TSBI consisted of 32 declarative statements. Helmreich and Stapp (1974) later developed two short forms of the TSBI. The short forms consist of 16 declarative statements for which there are five responses. The response choices are: Not at all characteristics of me, Not very, Slightly, Fairly and Very much characteristic of me. All items are given scores ranging from 0 to 4 with 0 defining the response associated with low social competence and 4 defining the response characteristic of high social

competence. The correlation between each short form and long form was r=.97. Test-retest reliability is .94 for males and .93 for females.

The TSBI has proved effective in predicting interpersonal attraction in laboratory studies (Ervin, 1969; Helmreich, Aronson & Lefan, 1970; Kimble & Helmreich, 1972)> The instrument is also strongly correlated with a new measure of masculinity and femininity, the PAQ self-rating scale (Personal Attributes Questionnaire; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974); the TSBI yields correlations of r=.81 and r=.83 with the masculinity subscale for males and females respectively, and correlations of r=.42 and r=.44 with the femininity subscale.

The Body Parts/Physical Attractiveness Scale consists of two parts. Part I consisted of rating how satisfied the individual is with 24 body parts. Each body part was rated on a six-point Likert scale. Response alternatives ranged from "1" "totally dissatisfied" to "6," "totally satisfied." Part II consists of rating self-perceived physical attractiveness. The six-point Likert scale ranged from "1" = "Extremely Unattractive" to "6" = "Extremely Attractive." Test-retest reliability and validity data on the Body Parts/Physical Attractiveness Scale are not available.

Analysis of the Results

The analysis of the data entailed the use of means, standard deviations, Pearson correlation coefficients and multiple regression. During the multiple regression analysis, the dependent variable was social competence. The independent variables consisted of self-perceived physical attractiveness, sex, age, weight, height, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance.

Statement of the Null Hypothesis

1. There is no significant correlation between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence.

2. For females, there is no significant correlation between self-perceived social competence and self-perceived physical attractiveness.
3. For males, there is no significant correlation between self-perceived social competence and self-perceived physical attractiveness.
4. Variables significantly contributing to self-perceived social competence for females do not differ from those for males.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 42.2% (N=157) males and 57.8% (N=215) females (Total N=372) enrolled in various undergraduate psychology courses at the University of Kansas in the Spring of 1988 and Fall of 1988. The mean age for males was 19.7 years (SD=1.97 years) and the mean age for females was 19.3 years (SD=2.64 years)>

The subjects were requested to indicate racial/ethnic identify and current marital status. The sample consisted of: 89.2% (N=332) Caucasian; 3.2% (N=12) Black; 2.9% (N=11) Oriental; 1.8% (N=7) Hispanic; 0.26% (N=1) American Indian and 2.4% (N=9) Other. Of the individuals samples, 97.3% (N=363) were single and 2.4% (N=9) were currently married.

The data were analyzed based on three groupings. The first grouping consisted of all subjects completing the survey. The second grouping contained only females and the third grouping consisted of only males.

In the overall group (Table 1), results indicated significant correlations ($p<.001$) between self-perceived social competence and the following variables: self-perceived physical attractiveness, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance. The relationship between self-perceived social competence and self-perceived physical attractiveness is a linear relationship; as physical

attractiveness increases so does the individual's level of social competence. The descriptive statistics for the overall group are detailed in Appendix F.

In the female only group (Table 2), results indicated significant correlations ($p<.001$) between self-perceived social competence and the following variables: self-perceived physical attractiveness, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance. The significant correlations imply that the female who perceives herself as being more physically attractive will also perceive herself as being more socially competent. The descriptive statistics for females only are detailed in Appendix G.

In the male only group (Table 3), results indicated significant correlations ($p<.001$) between self-perceived social competence and the following variables: self-perceived physical attractiveness, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance. The significant correlations imply that the male who perceives himself more physical attractiveness will also perceive himself as being more socially competent. The descriptive statistics for the males are detailed in Appendix H.

Multiple regression analysis allowed the researcher to determine which variables: weight, height, self-perceived physical attractiveness, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance were significant predictors ($p<.05$) of self-perceived social competence. For the female (Table 4), weight, height, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance were the significant contributors to a female's perceived social competence. For the male only group (Table 5), height and overall facial appearance were the significant contributors to a male's perceived social competence.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant correlation between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence.

   Hypothesis One was rejected. A significant correlation ($r=.267$; $p<.001$) between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence was found.

2. For females, there is no significant correlation between self-perceived social competence and self-perceived physical attractiveness.

   Hypothesis Two was rejected. A significant correlation ($r=.224$; $p<.001$) between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence was found.

3. For males, there is no significant correlation between self-perceived social competence and self-perceived physical attractiveness.

   Hypothesis Three was rejected. A significant correlation ($r=.286$; $p<.001$) between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence was found.

4. Variables significantly contributing to self-perceived social competence for females do not differ from those for males.

   Hypothesis Four was rejected. Variables that significantly contribute to females' self-perceived social competence (weight, height, OFA and OBA) were found to differ with those contributing to males' self-perceived social competence (height and OFA).

DISCUSSION

The conflict found within the existing literature led the researcher to conclude that further research was needed to clarify the relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence.

The purpose of this study was: 1) to investigate the relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence; and 2) to determine which if any of the following variables would significantly contribute ($p<.05$) to self-perceived social competence: sex, weight, height, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance.

Results indicated that there were significant positive correlations between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence for both females and males. In other words, no significant gender differences in patterns of response between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence were found. Both females and males who perceived themselves as physically attractive also tended to perceive themselves to be socially competent.

Results in the present study were supported by hypotheses developed by Berscheid and Walster (1974). Berscheid and Walster (1974) postulated that there is a developmental relationship between people's impression of an individual's physical attractiveness, the behavior toward the individual and the development of certain social characteristics by the individual. Therefore, a conclusion ascertained from this particular study is that there is a significant relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence for males and females. In other words, the greater the level of self-perceived physical attractiveness, the more likely the individual will report a greater sense of social competence.

The interpretation of this study's data does not support the hypotheses developed by Erikson (1968) or McCandless (1970). Erikson stated that due to the female's biological nature, the female's body-image is more highly related to physical attractiveness; whereas, the male's body-image is more highly

related to physical effectiveness. McCandless theorized that the female is socialized to base self-worth on socially mediated rewards. But for the male the rewards were based on physical ability rather than on the level of physical attractiveness. However, this study indicated that the male students placed similar level of significance on physical attractiveness with regards to social competence as did female students.

One explanation for the conflict between these theories and results is the changing role of men in this society. Society is sending the message for men to attempt incorporation of the feminine aspect of personality into practical, everyday behavior. Men are being bombarded, as never before, by the media, and the media is focusing on how important physical attractiveness is to the attainment of the goals of success. As more men are affected by this media bombardment, the increased awareness of the importance of physical attractiveness becomes apparent. It appears that this focus on physical attractiveness is more intense today than twenty years ago. Therefore, men and women in today's society would be more apt to view physical attractiveness more similarly than two decades ago due to changes in societal norms.

Another important aspect of this particular study focused on the identification of the males' and females' responses that contributed to the level of self-perceived social competence. The results of this study indicated that for males, height and overall facial appearance were the most significant contributions to the level of self-perceived social competence. Whereas, for females, weight, height, overall facial appearance and overall body appearance were the most significant contributors to the level of self-perceived social competence. These findings indicated that males used fewer variables than females when accounting for body characteristics that contribute to the level of self-perceived social competence.

There are no studies in the research literature that are replicates of this particular study. But there are two studies that are relatively similar to the current project. One study conducted by Mitchell and Orr (1976) examined self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived heterosexual social competence. It should be noted that the basic design in the Mitchell and Orr (1976) study was limited to heterosexual situations; whereas the present study took into account all social situations. Mitchell and Orr (1976) had the subjects self-report responses on imagined behavioral social interactions for anxiety, avoidance tendencies, self-perceived and other-perceived social interaction competencies. The conclusion from the Mitchell and Orr (1976) study cited that for males and females the level of self-perceived physical attractiveness was not related to self-perceived social competence in opposite-sex interactions. The conclusion reached by the present study was that for both males and females, the level of self-perceived physical attractiveness is related to self-perceived social competence in overall social interactions.

Why did the Mitchell and Orr (1976) study reach a different conclusion than the present study? The difference might be related to different time periods. The Mitchell and Orr study was conducted thirteen years ago in 1976. This current project appears to have been conducted during this society's love affair with physical appearance. During the late 1980's, the "me" generation is in full swing. This allows for the possibility that more males have bought into the importance of physical attractiveness as a measure of self-esteem and possible social success.

The second study conducted by Goldman and Lewis (1977) concluded that there was a significant relationship between self-rated physical attractiveness and social skillfulness. More specifically, females who self-rated physical attractiveness were other-perceived as being more socially skillful. But, for

males, there was no significant relationship between self-rated physical attractiveness and other-perceived social skillfulness.

The design difference in the Goldman and Lewis (1977) study and this present study focuses on the observer-rated versus self-rated physical attractiveness, as well as observer-rated versus self-rated social competence. Goldman and Lewis (1977) were concerned with retaining a naturalistic social situation. Therefore, the subjects conducted telephone interviews and then judged anxiety level and social skills. The subjects rated the partners for anxiety level and social skill in a separate seven-point scale. The level of physical attractiveness was self-rated as well as other-rated on a ten-point scale.

The conclusion of the Goldman and Lewis (1977) study and the present study were dissimilar. This difference might stem from the other-perceived social competence scale utilized by Goldman and Lewis (1977) compared to a self-perceived social competence utilized by this researcher. When other-perceived social competence is used, it allows for rater bias. The rater's definition of social competence might differ from the true definition. Goldman and Lewis (1977) noted that the subjects' ratings of social skill may be little more than an indirect measure of how much the subjects liked one another. The study used telephone interviews as the means of social interaction that would eliminate the bias in the ratings of social skill by perceived physical attractiveness. The problem with that particular approach is that it does not take into consideration ht social skills performed over the telephone might not be relevant to face-to-face social interactions.

The Mitchell and Orr (1976) study as well as the Goldman and Lewis (1977) study were not exact replicates of the present study, nor did the conclusions support the findings in this study. This leads to the conclusion

that there are design differences which can alter the conclusions drawn about physical attractiveness and social competence.

Implications

The intent of this study was to examine the relationship between self-perceived physical attractiveness and self-perceived social competence. The results indicated that there is a significant correlational relationship between the two for both sexes. What are the implications for counselors working with a client with a present problem of social incompetence? One implication for consideration is the client's self-perceived physical attractiveness. Early literature allowed for the conclusion that physical attractiveness was only an issue for females. Therefore, clinicians would be less likely to conclude that self-perceived physical attractiveness was relevant for males with presenting issues of low social competence. The current results indicate that such a conclusion might be erroneous and that regardless of the individual's gender, counselors should take into consideration the client's self-perceived physical attractiveness as well as overall body satisfaction. If the client has a problem with poor self-perceived physical attractiveness and is using negative self-evaluations to perpetuate this problem, the counselor can focus on training the client in procedures applied to overt behaviors (actions) or by modifying automatic thoughts, feelings and self-image (Mitchell and Orr, 1976).

Kanfer and Goldstein (1986) suggest reattribution and alternative conceptualizations as techniques for modifying negative automatic thoughts. Reattribution has been found to help clients attribute the appropriate level of responsibility for the negative event to herself or himself. Alternative conceptualization allows the client to examine the evidence, reinterpret the event and choose a more favorable alternative. Both techniques would seem to

be beneficial components of a therapeutic action plan addressing self-perceived social incompetence of both female and male clients.

In the past, physical attractiveness was often regarded as having little influence over an individual's thoughts and behaviors, particularly for the male. Physical attractiveness was given very little consideration as a possible contributor when evaluating individuals who perceived themselves as being socially incompetent. As a result of this current study, it would seem advisable to encourage clients to examine and express feelings about self-perceived body satisfaction and self-perceived physical attractiveness.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The subjects in the study were undergraduates from the University of Kansas. This particular population centered around the age group of 18 to 24 years old. The subjects had a narrow age range, though results might be informative for counselors working in a university setting. This narrow age range would limit the generalizability of results to all age groups.

The first recommendation involves the terms describing the levels of self-rated physical attractiveness in Part II of the Body Parts/Physical Attractiveness Scale. Several subjects thought that "Somewhat Attractive" (4 rating) indicated a lesser degree of attractiveness than the term, "Attractive" (3 rating). It is possible that this terminology might have confused other subjects as well as contaminated results in some way. The second recommendation to fellow researchers interested in the replication fo this study involves the Body Parts/Physical Attractiveness Scale (Part II). Part II requested that the individual self-rate physical attractiveness on a six-point Likert scale. The possibility of having a ten-point Likert Scale might allow the subject to better differentiate the levels of physical attractiveness.

Conclusion

In today's society, physical attractiveness is a relevant aspect of the individual's evaluation of one's social self. The individual draws conclusions about one's attractiveness based on the social reinforcement given by people interacting in the same environment. When in counseling, it would seem important to view the client's perception of the physical self as being equally important as the client's perceived social competence. This study has not resolved the conflict in the literature, but it has demonstrated that self-perceived physical attractiveness should be considered as an important issue to the females and males of this youthful population.

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Table 1

Pearson correlation coefficients between all pairs of variables for all subjects (N=372)

	AGE	SEX	WEIGHT	HEIGHT	SC	PA	OFA
SEX	.073						
WEIGHT	.063	.619**					
HEIGHT	.045	.702**	.738**				
SC	.033	-.053	-.004	-.008			
PA	-.054	-.081	-.011	-.022	.267**		
OFA	.070	-.043	-.009	-.052	.451**	.368**	
OBA	.124*	.169**	.052	.173**	.442**	.383**	.535**

Note
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$
SC = social competence
PA = physical attractiveness
OFA = overall facial appearance
OBA = overall body appearance

Table 2

Pearson correlation coefficients between all pairs of variables for females (N=215)

	AGE	WEIGHT	HEIGHT	SC	PA	OFA
WEIGHT	-.066					
HEIGHT	-.025	.464**				
SC	.058	.048	-.063			
PA	-.078	.036	.090	.224**		
OFA	.097	.012	.004	.411**	.390**	
OBA	.149*	-.145*	.099	.401**	.431**	.540**

Note
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$
SC = social competence
PA = physical attractiveness
OFA = overall facial appearance
OBA = overall body appearance

Table 3

Pearson correlation coefficients between all pairs of variables for males (N=157)

	AGE	WEIGHT	HEIGHT	SC	PA	OFA
WEIGHT	.158*					
HEIGHT	.026	.649**				
SC	.023	.027	.125			
PA	-.011	.053	-.006	.286**		
OFA	.023	.036	-.057	.415**	.355**	
OBA	.027	.026	.055	.399**	.407**	.579**

Note
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$
SC = social competence
PA = physical attractiveness
OFA = overall facial appearance
OBA = overall body appearance

Table 4

Multiple regression results of significant predictors for self-perceived social competence in females

Dependent Variable: Social Competence N:212 Multiple R: .515
Squared Multiple R: .265 Std Error of Est: 7.685

Variable	Coefficient	Std Error	Std Coef	T	P(2 Tail)
Constant	42.141	11.714	.000	3.597	.000
Weight	.080	.031	.175	2.533	.012
Height	-.515	.196	-.180	-2.632	.009
OFA	2.649	.813	.234	3.259	.001
OBA	2.899	.625	.342	4.635	.000

Note

OFA = Overall Facial Appearance
OBA = Overall Body Appearance
The remaining variables of age and physical attractiveness were not significant.

Table 5

Multiple regression results of significant predictors for self-perceived social competence for males

Dependent Variable: Social Competence N:156 Multiple R: .438
Squared Multiple R: .192 Std Error of Est: 7.801

Variable	Coefficient	Std Error	Std Coef	T	P(2 Tail)
Constant	-9.955	16.145	.000	-.617	.538
Height	.448	.218	.150	2.054	.042
OFA	4.511	.782	.420	5.772	.000

Note

OFA = Overall Facial Appearance
The remaining variables of age, weight, overall body appearance and physical attractiveness were not significant.